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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SITREP 14 - THE WAITING GAME CONTINUES

REF: TBILISI 1372

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Faint and uncertain signs of a Russian withdrawal are reported, but there is as yet no unmistakable sign of a pullback. Russian troops attempted August 19 to oust Georgian soldiers from a base in Western Georgia, to which the Georgians had retreated in conformity with the six-point agreement, but did not press on August 20 after the Georgians refused entry. The OSCE Chairman in office arrives in Tbilisi August 21, and is expected to have two of the new 20 monitors with him; the rest will be on the ground within ten days. More than one hundred civilians are reported to be held hostage in Tskhinvali, and the Russians seized 20 or more Georgian soldiers in Poti at the same time an exchange of all known prisoners took place outside Gori on August 19. Returned Georgian prisoners alleged mistreatment by their captors. The GOG is reporting that 215 Georgians have been killed in the conflict and 1469 wounded. A UNHCR convoy was allowed to enter Gori today, accompanied by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the German Ambassador. A U.S. citizen journalist was detained in Gori August 19 and held overnight by Russian troops and released without incident; four Amcit photographers were also detained for several hours in Gori August 20 by Russian troops before being released. Georgians confronted Russian troops in peaceful protests at checkpoints on the way to Gori and in Senaki. Opposition Georgian politicians are doing their best to hold back criticism of President Saakashvili, with some success. A recent poll shows the president with about 2/3 support in Tbilisi. End Summary.

RUSSIANS STILL ACTIVE, FEW SIGNS OF A PULLOUT

¶2. (C) Evidence of the beginning of a Russian pullout of Georgia is equivocal to say the least. Russian troops are reported to have removed two checkpoints from the town of Gori, possibly the beginning of a pull back. Two checkpoints remain on the north side of the town. A UNHCR humanitarian aid convoy, led by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and including the German Ambassador, was permitted to enter Gori by Russian troops. They met with the mayor and report that there are few people in the city. However, damage is limited to a few small areas of the city. Five U.S. citizen journalists were detained by Russian troops in Gori in two separate incidents. All were released unharmed. Explosions were heard on August 20 from the military base in Osiari, apparently as base infrastructure was neutralized. UNOMIG has told the Embassy that Russian troops are still moving freely about in Western Georgia.

¶3. (SBU) On August 19, Georgian police prevented a Russian column from entering the Sachkere military base in Western Georgia. The Russian commander threatened to return and use force to enter the base, but no reports of any forceful action have been received as of noon on August 20. Georgian troops had regrouped at the base, assuming they were in

conformity with the six-point agreement. The Georgian MFA regards the attempt to oust the troops from the base as a provocation and a violation of the agreement. It protested the continued "entering of cities, destroying military and civilian infrastructure, looting and robbing peaceful populations, dropping firebombs on forests, blowing up bridges, establishing new illegal checkpoints on highways, etc."

¶4. (SBU) The Georgian Orthodox church reported on August 19 that the Gori-Samtvisi Eparchy was raided by Russians and/or Ossetians. The Archbishop's car, cellphone was stolen and other priests in Gori had property taken from them. A bomb is reported to have hit the Nikozi Eparchy. Nuns were forced to leave convents in the Kodori Gorge and in Akhalgori in South Ossetia.

MORE HOSTAGES AND POW'S TAKEN

¶5. (SBU) Georgian soldiers released by the Russians yesterday in the prisoner exchange say they were tortured. Doctors who examined them found signs of beatings with blunt objects on the head and chest, burns and other bruises. Meanwhile, reports are that the Georgians taken prisoner by the Russians in Poti number about 20, and that they have been taken to Senaki. The governor of Samegrelo and the mayor of Poti are negotiating with the Russian commanders to secure their release.

¶6. (U) A journalist for the UK's Guardian newspaper reports that the number of Georgians held hostage in Tskhinvali is

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now 131, including some women and a 12-year-old girl.

TOLL OF GEORGIAN CASUALTIES

¶7. (U) According to the chairman of the parliamentary committee for defense and security, 215 Georgians have been killed in the conflict with Russia. Sixty-nine of them are civilians, 133 are military personnel, including four reservists and thirteen Ministry of Interior troops. Seventy soldiers are missing. He reports that 1,469 people have been injured of whom 446 are still in the hospital.

OSCE MONITORS NUMBER AND DEPLOYMENT UNCERTAIN

¶8. (C) Existing OSCE monitors have gotten permission to enter Tskhinvali from the Russian commander there. However, the head of the mission told us that she will not be sending observers into South Ossetia until she has assurances from the Russians that the monitors will be safe. OSCE Chairman in Office, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, will arrive in Tbilisi on August 21, and is expected to be accompanied by the first two of the additional 20 monitors authorized by the OSCE on August 19. Officers at OSCE's Tbilisi office report that the 20 monitors are expected to be on the ground in Tbilisi in the next ten days. Monitors will initially work out of Tbilisi for the first 2-4 weeks. Once additional monitors arrive (from the additional 80 monitors expected) and if the security situation allows, OSCE hopes to set up a base in Gori and eventually, in Tskhinvali.

PROTESTERS CONFRONT THE OCCUPIERS

¶9. (U) The press reported that Georgian students, young people, trade unionists and businessmen protested the Russian occupation at the checkpoint in Igoeti on the road from Tbilisi to Gori. They faced off against Russian soldiers, who were backed up by a tank. The message was that Georgians will not be intimidated by the Russians. Another demonstration by 3000 protesters took place in Senaki near

the Russian-occupied military base.

DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITIES

¶10. (U) British Foreign Secretary David Miliband arrived in Tbilisi on August 19 from the NATO ministerial in Brussels. In a press conference he expressed the UK's support for Georgia and its people. Earlier, in Brussels, he termed the Russian occupation a violation of international law. A delegation from the Council of Europe and the European Parliament arrived on a fact-finding mission the same day.

¶11. (SBU) A French Embassy representative is continuously monitoring six Russian battalions between Zugdidi and Senaki. Senators Lieberman and Lindsay Graham, accompanied by Rep Chris Smith, are in Tbilisi August 20, meeting with President Saakashvili and the Prime Minister. They will also visit an IDP shelter in Tbilisi and observe the off-loading of a U.S. military humanitarian assistance flight. The Senators will depart Tbilisi the same day; Rep. Smith plans to remain in Tbilisi to support the repatriation of several American citizen minors who are unable to get back to Tbilisi because of continued Russian troop movements on the main highway.

AMCIT ARRESTED, EXPELLED FROM GORI

¶12. (C) An American journalist (representing a San Diego, California newspaper) who had found his way into Gori was arrested and held by the Russians overnight on August 19-20. He was released and returned to Tbilisi on August 20 after intervention by Embassy Moscow. The journalist was not abused or mistreated. On August 21, a group of four U.S. citizen photographers were detained by Russian troops in Gori. They were released without incident after several hours and were in the process of returning to Tbilisi.

POST-INVASION POLITICKING SLOWLY BEGINS

¶13. (U) Former Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze publicly criticized President Saakashvili in a Reuters interview on August 18. She said the government will face "tough questions" about what led to the conflict with Russia. She promised to play an active political role after the crisis abates. Burjanadze had formerly been closely allied with Saakashvili. Opposition leader Levan Gachechiladze talked to the Financial Times about the need for new

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elections as soon as possible. However, he and other opposition politicians later called for a moratorium on confrontation with the government until after the Russians leave Georgia. For the moment, a GORBI telephone poll shows Saakashvili's popularity is higher than it has been, as 69 percent of Tbilisi residents approve of how he is handling his job. A majority still favor Georgia's NATO membership. Eighty-five percent are holding on to a favorable view of Western countries.

TEFFT